

# CALCIUM QUICKFACTS



Calcium-rich foods include milk, cheese, and yogurt; vegetables like kale, broccoli, and Chinese cabbage; and canned sardines and salmon with soft bones that you eat.

Calcium is a mineral in food that people need to stay healthy. It builds bones and teeth and keeps them strong. Muscles, nerves, and all parts of the body need calcium to work well.

## How much calcium do I need?

It depends on your age. Here are amounts people should get each day, on average, in milligrams (mg):

Birth to 6 months	200 mg
Infants 7–12 months	260 mg
Children 1–3 years	700 mg
Children 4–8 years	1,000 mg
Children 9–13 years	1,300 mg
Teens 14–18 years	1,300 mg
Adults 19–50 years	1,000 mg
Adult men 51–70 years	1,000 mg
Adult women 51–70 years	1,200 mg
Adults 71 years and older	1,200 mg
Pregnant and breastfeeding teens	1,300 mg
Pregnant and breastfeeding adults	1,000 mg

## What foods provide calcium?

Many foods have some calcium. You can get enough calcium by eating a variety of foods including milk, cheese, and yogurt; vegetables like kale, broccoli, and Chinese cabbage; and canned sardines and salmon with soft bones that you eat.

Calcium is added to some breakfast cereals, fruit juices, soy and rice beverages, and tofu (check the product labels).

## What kinds of calcium dietary supplements are available?

Many multivitamin-mineral supplements have calcium. You can also buy calcium alone or together with vitamin D. If your supplement has calcium carbonate, you should take it with food. Calcium citrate costs more but you can take it on an empty stomach, and people older than 50 can absorb it more easily. To absorb the most calcium from a supplement, don't take more than 500 mg at once. So, for example, if you take 1,000 mg of calcium a day, split the dose in two and take them at separate times. Calcium pills can cause gas, bloating, or constipation. If these occur, take smaller amounts at different times of the day, take the pills with meals, or try a different brand.

## Am I getting enough calcium?

Many people don't get enough calcium from food. This includes girls 9 to 18 years of age, women over the age of 50 and men over 70. Children need calcium and vitamin D to make bones strong. And after menopause especially, women need calcium and

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vitamin D to help keep their bones strong. Calcium-rich foods and supplements can help people get enough calcium.

Other people who might not get enough calcium include (1) vegetarians who avoid dairy foods, (2) people who are lactose intolerant (drinking milk upsets their stomach), (3) people with eating disorders, and (4) women who exercise so much that they stop having a monthly period. These people might need to take calcium supplements.

### What happens if I don't get enough calcium?

Usually nothing obvious happens in the short run if you don't get enough calcium. But over many years, not getting the amount of calcium you need can weaken your bones and make them break more easily.

### What are some effects of calcium on health?

Scientists are studying calcium to see how it affects health. Here are a few examples of what this research has shown.

#### Bone problems

As people get older, their bones can become weak and break easily (a condition called osteoporosis). Foods and supplements with both calcium and vitamin D can help keep bones healthy. Talk to your health care provider about how much calcium and vitamin D you need to prevent or treat osteoporosis.

#### Heart Disease

Most studies do not show a link between the amount of calcium people get and their chances of having a heart attack or stroke.

#### High blood pressure

Getting recommended amounts of calcium may lower blood pressure. If your blood pressure is high, eat plenty of low-fat and fat-free dairy products, vegetables, and fruits.

#### Cancer

Scientists are studying whether recommended amounts of calcium might lower the chance of getting cancer of the colon and rectum. It's too early to tell whether calcium intakes affect the risk of cancer.

#### Kidney stones

Most kidney stones are not caused by too much or too little calcium. But getting a lot of calcium from dietary supplements might increase the chance of getting kidney stones. In most cases, drinking enough liquids is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of kidney stones.

### Weight loss

Can more calcium help you lose weight or body fat? Maybe, but the best studies so far have not shown that calcium helps much.

### Can calcium be harmful?

Getting too much calcium can cause constipation and could make it harder for the body to absorb iron and zinc. In adults, too much calcium (from dietary supplements but not food) can also increase the chance of getting kidney stones.

The safe upper limits for calcium are listed below.

Birth to 6 months	1,000 mg
Infants 7 – 12 months	1,500 mg
Children 1–8 years	2,500 mg
Children 9–18 years	3,000 mg
Adults 19 – 50 years	2,500 mg
Adults 51 years and older	2,000 mg
Pregnant and lactating teens	3,000 mg
Pregnant and lactating adults	2,500 mg

### Are there any interactions with calcium that I should know about?

Some medicines (like some laxatives, antibiotics, and drugs to treat osteoporosis or thyroid disease) lower the amount of calcium the body absorbs. Other medicines (antacids with aluminum or magnesium, and mineral-oil laxatives) lower the amount of calcium in the body.

Bottom line: Tell your doctor, pharmacist, and other health care providers about any dietary supplements and medicines you take. They can tell you if those supplements might interact or interfere with your prescription or over-the-counter medicines, or if the medicines might affect how your body uses calcium.

### Where can I find out more about calcium?

- Office of Dietary Supplements Health Professional Fact Sheet on Calcium
- For more advice on buying dietary supplements, see the Office of Dietary Supplements Frequently Asked Questions
- For information on the government's food guidance system, see MyPyramid and Dietary Guidelines for Americans

### Disclaimer

This fact sheet by the Office of Dietary Supplements provides information that should not take the place of medical advice. We encourage you to talk to your healthcare providers (doctor, registered dietitian, pharmacist, etc.) about your interest in, questions about, or use of dietary supplements and what may be best for your overall health.



For more information on this and other supplements, please visit our Web site at: <http://ods.od.nih.gov> or e-mail us at [ods@nih.gov](mailto:ods@nih.gov)

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